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ABSTRACT

Guidelines teachers have found useful for initiating and maintaining formal and informal communication with parents are provided in this discussion for child caregivers. Topics briefly discussed include the mechanics of initiating a conference, working with parents during a conference, arranging meetings for parent groups, and techniques for fostering parent involvement. The general aim of the discussion is to provide teachers with a strategy for reducing the atmosphere of personal threat to participants in parent/teacher dialogues and for increasing the effective exchange of information in the conference situation. In addition to a list of specific techniques for working with parents during a conference, the paper provides a list of ways teachers can use language to establish rapport with parents. A brief form for assessing the extent of parent/teacher communication in day care centers and a sample report form for recording topics discussed in conference are appended. (RH)

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PARENT-DAY CARE CENTER COMMUNICATION

by

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Introduction

Starting to care for a 2 year old can be as anxiety producing as coming into the middle of a mystery movie, if the caregiver does not have the benefit of communication with the parents about the child in care. Caregiver and parents share a vital task and find that communication cuts down on the frustration of the child, the caregiver and the parents. Contact between parents and staff may be informal or planned. Many caregivers are hesitant to initiate a conference with parents for fear of upsetting them. The same is true for parents. The caregiver must set the tone of the information sharing relationship from the beginning, as she gathers information, prior to the child's entry into care. After the initial contacts with the parents, efforts must be made to keep the communication lines open for caregivers and parents alike.

This paper is a compilation of materials which teachers have found useful when initiating and maintaining formal and informal communication with parents. The topics covered include: The mechanics of setting up a conference, techniques for working with parents during a conference, setting up parent meetings, and techniques for fostering parent involvement.

A clear definition of who the parent is helps the caregiver work more effectively with the family. Parent may be defined as the natural parent or parent with prime responsibility. The parent without custody often has no legal rights but may be included in the parent-caregiver conference if it seems wise and appropriate. The custodial parent should be consulted if the non-custodial parent is to be included in a conference. If the child is under the guardianship of the Department of Children and Family Services, the caregiver should get a determination from DCFS on the inclusion of natural parents, foster parents or careworker in the caregiver-parent conference.

Self-Assessment

The reader is invited to assess his working environment before reading further. The following nine points are reflective of information and ideas presented in this paper.

WORKING WITH PARENTS	Never	Seldom	Often	Always
1. Do staff and parents have scheduled and non-scheduled conferences in order to share knowledge about the child?	1	2	3	4
2. Does the staff provide adequate information to parents regarding major educational program activities? (e.g., participation in field trips, parent education opportunities, training)	1	2	3	4
3. Does the staff encourage parent involvement in all facets of the program?	1	2	3	4
4. Has the center written a plan which describes how the program will encourage parent participation?	1	2	3	4
5. Are parents active members of the day care center board?	1	2	3	4
6. Is the center open to parents at times reasonable and convenient to them?	1	2	3	4
7. Does the staff encourage parents to observe the classroom several times a year?	1	2	3	4
8. Does the center staff use an adequate conference reporting form?	1	2	3	4
9. Do the parents receive regular newsletters?	1	2	3	4

THE CONFERENCE

In one sense, a conference is nothing more than a meeting between two people who have something to share. If concern for the child is the center of the conference, chances are each person will feel good about the meeting and less threatened personally.

The conference situation may be highly charged, however. Parents and teachers have a lot at stake and personal defenses may be strong. Many hidden agendas will emerge in conferences, but the teacher who keeps in mind the welfare of the child will be less threatened and more alert to possibilities for effective response.

Initiating the Conference

Both teachers and parents

Teachers can initiate conferences:

1) to suggest ways parents can help the child at home
2) to disucss center problems
3) to discuss developmental or social concerns
4) to learn more about the child's interests and background
5) to clarify ideas to help the child.

Parents can initiate conferences:

1) to ask about caregiving techniques
2) to inquire about curriculum
3) to discuss behavioral problems
4) to alert the teacher about changes in the child's environment.

The teacher should set the stage for the conference with careful planning. The time and location as well as the content to be discussed are all key factors.

Time Allotted

Most conferences with parents need a minimum of one-half hour. If several are scheduled for the same day, intervals should be planned in between to permit an extension of the conversation or for the teacher to focus attention on the next session. A serious conference in which there will be an exchange of information can't be completed in ten or fifteen minutes.

Place of Conference

If a classroom is to be used, the teacher needs to arrange chairs, and possibly a table, in such a way to permit conversation. The teacher's desk is not an appropriate site because it would make it seem like a report from an authority figure. Also, the position of teacher behind the desk encourages "talking down" to parents by the teacher. If a teacher's room or conference room with comfortable chairs is available, the conference should be held there. Although the room is still on day care center territory, this setting is more conducive for conversation.

If a parent can't come to the school, the teacher may want to go to the parent's home. There are advantages for both teacher and parent. The parent may have several children and find it difficult to get a sitter. The parent may be unwilling to enter what is, in his view, a strange environment - the center. The home is familiar and permits him to be more certain in his dealings with the teacher. The teacher may find the home conference quite rewarding in that the child's interactions with the parent, and the parent's life style may give helpful background about the child.

However, the teacher should not expect to conduct a home conference without arranging it in advance. The parent will not appreciate being taken unaware.

How to Make Contact

The end of the session, when parents come to pick up children, is not the time for a conference. Parents and teachers are tired; children are anxious to go home. A quick discussion of a possible conference time can be held then but should be confirmed by a phone call later.

Many parents do not want to be called at work unless for emergency reasons. Their coworkers or administrators may discourage personal phone calls. If calls can't be made to the parent's home or a meeting scheduled during pick up time, a note home may do the trick.

Teachers may find it inconvenient to be stopped in the grocery store by a parent, but this may be the place to talk about a future meeting. In certain communities, it is possible to visit the parents at home to invite them to a meeting or conference at a later date. Meetings to arrange a conference time should focus on that idea. Teachers should be open and responsive to parents but can be firm about arranging a future date as the appropriate time for a lengthy discussion.

What Do You Talk About in a Conference?

The child and his concerns are the reasons for a conference. The teacher should have thought through the information for the parent and questions to be raised. Sample papers, reports from the child's other teachers and specialists should be available during the session kept in a folder.

Each parent will expect specific comments about the child's activities and behavior rather than generalizations such as "Johnny's doing fine". Using skill as an observer, the teacher can make specific comments about the child's social interactions with peers and adults, likes and dislikes in activities, well-being, and health.

The language the teacher uses should be simple and straightforward and contain no jargon. Sometimes centers develop checklists which are completed by the staff, discussed in the conference, and given to the parent to keep. Such a form helps clarify items discussed and allows the parent to share conference material with other family members as well as the child. Of course, each teacher should keep a carbon for the center records.

TECHNIQUES FOR WORKING WITH PARENTS DURING A CONFERENCE

1. Sit in a comfortable place. Do not sit behind the desk or table which tends to give an air of authority. A quiet place with two comfortable chairs is best.

2. Make sure there will be no interruptions to break long discussions... it tends to break train of throught or any progress in the conference.

3. Establish a two-way conversation. An angry parent must be able to share.

4. Engender a feeling of mutual concern...and the concern on the part of the teacher must be sincere.

5. Employ the art of listening. This art includes listening for facts and emotional feelings, and being able to separate the two.

6. Express ideas held in common with the parent.

7. Don't give advice. The authoritarian attitude takes away the give and take from the parent.

8. When the conference deals with a serious problem, give a clear statement of the difficulty immediately.

9. Do not criticize. This only tends to arouse emotion rather than facts.

10. Try to get the parents to take the initiative in conversing.

11. Arguing only arouses resentment and resistance.

12. Do not be on the defensive. Remain silent if necessary.

13. Use a non-judgmental attitude.

Sample Report Form

School_____ Teacher_____ Date_____

Child_____ Parent Attending_____

Objectives for Child: Notes for Discussion

I a.

b.

II a.

b.

Additional Comments:

By parents:

By teacher:

Each teacher should focus on the parent rather than the information to be shared especially at the beginning of the conference. What does the parent want to say? It may be that the parent is waiting for the teacher and is hesitant to say anything. On the other hand, the parent may be eager to talk, to share a concern, or ask a question. Begin with the person you are meeting. If a parent is thinking about what he wants to say, sharing ideas about the child's progress will be difficult. What the parent says will create discussion and eliminate some time for your report about the child. However, it will be worth it; the view gained of the parent and the information shared will be valuable for you as you work with the child.

Sometimes parents talk only about themselves. This is a cue that the parent needs help. The teacher shouldn't try to act as counselor in this situation, but may be able to refer the parent to a person or agency which can help. If it is possible to refer the parent to a resource person in the center, that appointment may be arranged right there. Otherwise, if the parent agrees, the teacher can make the referral later. The right thing to do is to get the person to the right resource. Every teacher will feel for the adult in need, but professional service means that competent help from the appropriate agency or person be provided. Of course, nothing prevents a teacher from helping a parent find or get to the resource.

Sometimes parents approach the center and the teacher belligerently. They are unhappy about some event or perceived behavior. A good strategy in this instance is to listen quietly until the barrage is over. Then, on the basis of what was said, select a point which may have validity and agree to it. This has the effect of relieving pressure and permitting discussion.

Parents will appear angry or hostile if they are frustrated about the center and feel they have not had legitimate access to staff. Occasionally,

parents don't know how to approach the center and, consequently, wait until they are desperate to attack the most obvious center representative, the teacher. Some parents have valid concerns. At any rate, frustration must be treated seriously. If a teacher finds that a reasonable effort to listen and respond is of no avail, it may be advisable to call in the director as a third party. Hopefully, the helper will be objective.

No resolution to a problem can occur in a war-like situation. The teacher needs to treat the belligerent parent with respect. However, there is no need to accept abuse. If the parent does not respond to reasonable concern, the teacher should contact the director immediately for support and assistance. Most center situations involving angry and troubled parents can be resolved by teachers who will listen with the intent of solving the problem as constructively as possible.

Language establishes rapport -- and the success of the conference. Teachers can set the tone for the discussion by attending to the following:

1) be truthful and honest.
2) consider the parent as an equal participant in the conference.
3) listen to parents seriously; be prepared to use their input in your work with the child (expand on the ideas parents express in the discussion).
4) explain your ideas and those of the center as clearly as possible.
5) express admiration for the parent's work with the child and appreciation for his interest.
6) don't be shocked or amused by what parents say.
7) don't be on the defensive or argumentative.
8) avoid terms which belittle or are scornful; don't use sarcasm; don't criticize.

9) don't pry into the parents personal life; if the parent volunteers information, treat it with professional discretion.

10) don't give advice. Try to encourage problem solving.

Your attitude toward the conference as a sharing of information and concern about a child by two equal participants will focus the discussion in positive constructive ways.

About Parents Expectations of the Child

Parents have varying expectations for their children. Some are too demanding and some are not demanding enough. Parents may be too critical of their children, even disappointed in them. Some may even believe that the center perceives the child as more capable than the parent believes him to be.

A teacher will find this perspective helpful in his work with the child. It may not be possible for the teacher to help the parent modify his view of the child. However, specific information and samples of work will be helpful, especially for the parent who appears to undervalue his child's achievements. The teacher may rely on other resources of the school for cases which seem to cause serious problems for the child. Here, a counselor or social worker may be able to work with these parents.

WRITTEN MESSAGES TO THE HOME

Letters mailed home and messages sent home with children frequently are used by teachers to contact parents. These written communiques can be quite helpful but messages sent with children can be lost or thrown away. The teacher has no way of knowing that written messages were not received. One commonly used technique is to require a response from the parent either in the form of a receipt or some written or telephoned message. If messages are important, a second system can be used. Telephone trees cost no money and relatively little time to set up and operate.

Teachers or administrative personnel frequently send parents forms or reports which require a response. These reports should be written as clearly and simply as possible. The response required from the parent should be specified. Not all parents feel comfortable about filling out forms or writing letters, so other response alternatives should be given.

PARENT MEETINGS

Parent meetings, or group sessions, may serve a variety of purposes. They may be both an efficient and effective way to share information and ideas important to parents and teachers. It may be a way for parents and teachers to become acquainted with a minimal amount of stress before conferences are initiated. In parent meetings, topics must be pertinent for several parents at least. This is not the time or place for individual teacher-parent conferences. The size of the group for a parent meeting can vary from less than ten to 50 or so. The determining factor is the purpose for the meeting.

One common large group session is the annual Open-House. The school staff hopes in these sessions to contact a majority of the parents to familiarize them quickly with the facility, staff, educational philosophy, and general policies. Parents may come to the school to see their child's new room and teacher. For whatever reason the parent comes, the staff can use this contact to extend to parents the opportunities to work together.

Large group sessions are frequently criticized as a waste of time by staff because a high percentage of parents may not come. In this case, center staff need to evaluate the setting, time, and purpose of the meetings.

If all large group sessions are scheduled at night, some parents will not come because they are tired, have conflicts, can't find a baby sitter, or they work at night. Perhaps dual sessions can be offered -- one during

the evening and one during day hours. The parent can choose which time is best.

Parent meetings held in an auditorium may seem appropriate. However, the arrangement of auditorium seats prevents interaction between parents and between parent and teacher. This may not be important for informative sessions, but if discussion or questions are to be encouraged, this setting negates mutuality.

The annual open house is usually planned to introduce parents to the center, its staff, facility, and materials. Sometimes a program is planned either for all parents in an introductory session or for small groups of parents in individual classrooms. The Open House may be an effective way to bring parents into the center for a first contact. However, it has been criticized because a low percentage of parents actually attend. If an Open House displays children's work, or there is something for parents to do, more parents will turn out.

Perhaps group meetings would be more effective if kept small, with the groups selected on some common basis. A teacher may initiate meetings for the parents of children inher room. The purpose may be to discuss the characteristics of children of an approximate age range, to share mutual problems and solutions, or to discuss new curricular ideas. Policies or procedures of the center can be presented to and discussed by a group of this size. If it seems appropriate, special services personnel can be invited to explain programs and discuss ways of working with children.

Parents in this setting have an opportunity to meet each other and the teacher. If the group attending is small at first, the parents who do come can be helpful in planning future sessions and ways of contacting other parents. "Each one bring one" is still an effective idea. Planning which

includes the parent will improve the quality of the experience. If the teacher or center administrator has planned a meeting for a purpose which could be better served another way, the attending parents may say so, if given an opportunity. Input from parents will help insure that meetings have value for parents and are attended.

Teachers who view parents as co-participants will avoid lecturing to parents as though they were students in a class. Refreshments should be served, although they may be kept quite simple. Eating together is an important way to express friendship and acceptance. Parents should be encouraged to come in casual dress and should be welcomed warmly by the teacher. The parent who feels ignored or unwelcome will be reluctant to come back for future meetings or conferences. A small group session permits the teacher to speak with individuals comfortably.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE DAY CARE PROGRAM

A common complaint of caregivers has been that it is difficult to interest parents in the day care program. Parent motivation for involvement with the child's day care program may be hard to identify. Most caregivers agree that one sure way to get parents to come to the center is to have the children perform. That technique does work but it may not be valuable for the child. Other parent involvement techniques, gathered from the caregivers and directors of day care centers in northern Illinois, are also successful.

Some centers have work nights to which all willing parents are invited. The parents can build shelves, lay carpeting or do general cleaning. The parents enjoy the informal contact with the staff, the center and each other. Other parents enjoy taking projects home. Sewing and minor repairs

of equipment can be done by parents if the center has a person to coordinate the volunteers and jobs to be done. Other centers invite parents to lunch with the children where it can be scheduled. This is a good chance for a short term visit which can be convenient to both the parents and staff.

A parent lounge and bulletin board are welcome additions to a center. Parents appreciate a place to relax and share information with other parents and caregivers. Parents enjoy potluck suppers after working hours with child care provided for part of the time so that parents and teachers can have a chance to share information and socialize. Centers with populations of mixed ethnic backgrounds have sponsored international nights. Parents can share their favorite ethnic foods or crafts with the group. This type of informal sharing fosters positive relationships between the day care center staff and the parents.

Parent participation in the center is desirable for all concerned. The parents are vitally interested in the place where their children spend so much time and the teachers enjoy the extra help. The children have the security of knowing that the significant people in their lives are partners in care.

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